

Driving away the shadows

St. Francis of Assisi must be one of the best-known saints. But I didn't feel a special connection to him until 14 years ago when I went on a retreat.

It was really just a personal retreat, not a formal arrangement. When I arrived at the St. Francis of Assisi Friary in Wilmington, Del., I was just looking for a place to get away and think and pray. The Franciscan priest on the phone had asked for a donation of \$35 a night, which seemed so small. When I pulled into the driveway, he came right up to my car and welcomed me with warmth—smiling as if we were already friends and radiating peace.

That priest, Fr. Tom Pietrantonio, became an important friend. That weekend we talked about little things, and that somehow helped make sense of the big things.

It was a time of transition in my life—I had just said goodbye to our family dog of 12 years, and I had ended a serious relationship—and I found I was in just the right place to heal. I ate simple meals with the priests and monks there. I took walks on the grounds. I went to Mass and cried during the most beautiful version of “How Great Thou Art” I have ever heard.

Fr. Tom never asked why I had come. I don't think I ever told him. But we had many conversations on the porch and in the kitchen. He told me how he had known as a child that he was called to the priesthood as he watched a Franciscan open and close windows in a chapel with simple, authentic reverence.

Later when I met the man who would become my husband, I brought him to meet Fr. Tom. And our friend drove to Baltimore to concelebrate our wedding Mass. I think of Fr. Tom on the feast of St. Francis—and many other times during the year. And I talk to him because I feel certain he's in heaven.

Since that weekend, I have also come to see St. Francis as a special friend. When my husband and I were first married and we were watching every penny closely, I splurged on a St. Francis statue and carried it home to our little apartment. He's still with us, standing proudly in our living room—astonishingly not knocked over in anyone's exuberance.

And I think it's no coincidence that my husband was born on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi.

As we celebrate the feast today, I wanted to share a few favorite quotes from St. Francis. I love his prayer, of course. But these lines are so powerful to me.

"If God can work through me, He can work through anyone."

"Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words."

"Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible."

"A single sunbeam is enough to drive away many shadows."

I hope today each of us can be a sunbeam to others and help drive away the shadows around us. St. Francis, pray for us.